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REAL VIOLIN ROMANCES

PAGANINI'S MAGICAL GUARNERIUS

By W. C. HONEYMAN

WHEN Paganini was just seventeen his marvellous playing attracted the attention of Parsini the painter, himself an accomplished violin-player.

'He can play anything at sight that man can write,' said a friend to Parsini.

'I do not believe it,' said Parsini, and for days he was invisible. Then he approached Paganini, carrying in one hand a grand violin by Antonio Stradivari, and in the other a violin concerto of extraordinary difficulty which he had written, but could not himself perform.

Said the artist to Paganini, 'If you play that at sight I will give you my violin.'

'Then you may bid farewell to your fiddle,' was the confident reply of the violin wizard, who played the piece without an effort.

Shortly after he nearly lost this violin through his passion for gambling. 'Watch, jewels, rings and medals, all had gone,' he afterwards related, 'and my money was reduced to three francs. A prince had offered me two thousand francs for my violin and I needed money to take me to St. Petersburg, where I was engaged to play. I threw down the three francs as my last chance to keep my violin, and won one hundred and sixty francs! I was saved, but renounced gambling for ever, as contemptible to all right-thinking men.' Earning money so easily, however, he was careless, and was soon again in straits, and had to place his violin in pawn at Leghorn as se-

curity for money borrowed. Then he found himself without either money or a violin.

'I cannot play tonight,' he said to M. Livron, a merchant and distinguished amateur violinist. 'I have no violin.'

'Play upon mine,' was the eager response; 'there is not a violin equal to it in the whole world.'

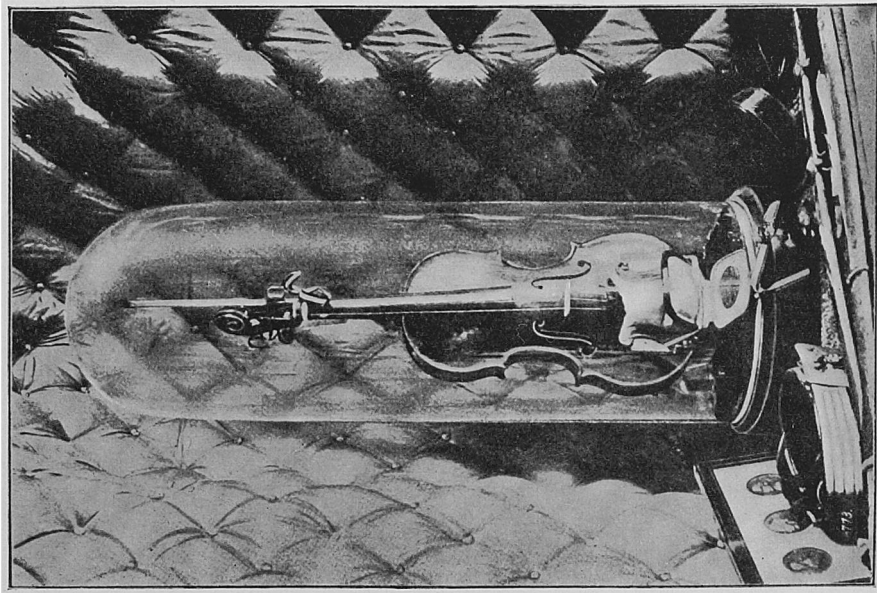
Paganini played that night as he thought he had never before succeeded in playing, and naturally gave part of the credit to the violin, and somewhat sadly returned it to its owner. But Livron had been at the concert, and more deeply thrilled than any one else there, and he handed back the violin to Paganini, with these words, '*Je me garderai bien de profaner des cordes que vos doigts ont touché; c'est à vous maintenant que mon violon appartient*' ('I shall take good care never to profane the strings which your fingers have touched; it is to you that my violin now belongs').

The violin thus nobly bestowed and eagerly welcomed was made in Cremona in the year 1743 by Joseph Guarneri; and Paganini, with one exception, played upon no other till the day of his death, as he could always get a more robust and penetrating tone from it in large halls than from any violin by Stradivari, and was thus the first to draw attention to the grandeur and beauty of Guarneri's works. More than that, this magical violin seemed to be a mascot to him, for from the time that he took it to his heart his fortunes never looked back, and gold poured into



PAGANINI

From the painting by J. A. D. Ingres now in the collection of M. Léon Bonnat



PAGANINI'S CELEBRATED GUARNERIUS

Bequeathed by him to his native town of Genoa and now in the Municipal Museum there. The violin was presented to Paganini, and until the day of his death, with one exception, he played upon no other

his pockets ceaselessly. It answered every call of his passionate nature, and even then seemed to have a reserve of power not touched. With that magic violin he conquered Europe. It was thought to be a demon violin, and all kinds of monstrous fables were heaped upon it and its owner, in spite of his dignified protest. Paganini was also accused of meanness, and was described as keeping a concert audience in London waiting while he took shelter from the rain rather than pay for a cab to take him to the hall. The writer of this calumny forgot that for a stranger in London to go out into a downpour of rain to hunt for a cab was a sure way to get wet to the skin, while to remain in shelter was a sure way to keep dry. Paganini's health was never good, and even then (1831) he was suffering from the affection of the throat which carried him to the grave. The life of a delicate man is worth more than the convenience of many concert audiences.

All London rushed to hear the demon violin, and to announce a concert with Paganini was a sure way to have any hall filled to overflowing, though for each concert Paganini alone received two hundred pounds.

The news of this extraordinary success reached a poor widow in Brighton, who was struggling hard to support herself and her young family by teaching music, and she conceived the bold idea of asking the wizard violinist to perform at a concert in Brighton, and wrote to him asking his terms. To her surprise, she received a reply to the effect that Paganini would be pleased to play at her concert for one-half of his usual fee, namely, one hundred pounds. The concert duly took place, and the widow's little son, named George Augustus Sala, then a child of seven, heard Paganini for the first and only time. The concert, however, barely paid expenses, and Mrs. Sala, with a sad heart, realized that

when all were paid she would have hardly a shilling left. Next forenoon Paganini called for his money, and was paid. Mrs. Sala had thought of appealing to him for some reduction; but one look at his grim face scared the thought away, and she quietly conducted the great artist to the door, where the little G. A. S., in a shabby velvet suit, already had posted himself.

Paganini patted the boy on the head, said, 'Good child!' shook hands with the widow, and disappeared.

Mrs. Sala turned away with tears in her eyes; but the boy cried out joyously, 'See, mamma! See the pretty picture he gave me!' The 'pretty picture' was a bank-note for one hundred pounds.

Once only was Paganini induced to use another violin than the magic Guarnerius, and that was about a year after his visit to Britain (1832), when, run down in health, he was staying and resting in Paris. Instead of hanging up a stocking at Christmas as we do, the French place a wooden sabot on the hearth; and some one who thought Paganini rather niggardly with presents sent him a sabot almost big enough for a cradle, taking care that this sabot should arrive when he was entertaining a large company, the intention of the sender evidently being to sneer at Paganini as more ready to receive presents than to give them.

The maid who brought in the queer present was almost the only one in the villa with whom the invalid exchanged words, and he was surprised one morning to notice that her eyes were red with weeping.

'What is wrong with my little Nicette this morning?' he asked; whereupon, with fresh tears, the girl told him that her sweetheart had drawn the black number, and had to go away as a conscript to the war then impending.

Paganini sat at a table diligently carving a piece of ivory for the handle of a dagger, with his beloved Guarnerius and the

wooden shoe near him, and his eye travelled from his work to these.

'Could your Adolph not be bought off?' he gravely asked.

'Yes; but fifteen hundred francs is the lowest price for a substitute,' answered the girl, 'and we have not saved the quarter of that.'

'I wonder what that shoe could do,' thoughtfully observed Paganini; to which Nicette made no reply, as she feared that the kind *maestro* must be going mad.

Paganini, however, was skilled in the use of edge tools, and he secretly thinned down the wooden shoe from within, fitted it with a table of thin pine, fastened a neck to it, with pegs and strings, and, lo! the sabot was a violin—of a kind. He then announced a concert, for one hundred people only, at which he would have the pleasure of playing five pieces upon a sabot. Every ticket was eagerly bought, and when the evening of the concert arrived Paganini appeared with his beloved Guarnerius, and fairly electrified the audience by playing as he had never done before. Then, as a second part, he brought on the uncouth shoe-violin, and began to improvise some of his strange romances in music. It was soon clear to the listeners what that weird music represented. It was the life of a conscript; his drawing of the black number, the grief of his sweetheart, his departure, the bustle of the camp, the tumult of battle, the shouts of victory, the return of the conscripts, and the joyous pealing of wedding-bells.

Behind the scenes stood Nicette in tears, knowing too well what the music meant—the loss of her lover, and the possible blighting of her whole life; but, to her surprise, Paganini called her to the front, and said, 'My little Nicette, here are two thousand francs which the old shoe has earned for you; that is five hundred more than you need to buy off Adolph. And here also is

the old sabot; perhaps some one will give you a few francs for it.'

Somebody did, for when it was put up for auction 'a mad Englishman' gave six thousand francs for it, and sent Nicette away home almost fainting with joy.

Needless to say that Nicette till her last day on earth never forgot Paganini's goodness; and when he died, eight years later, there was not in the whole world one who mourned for him more sincerely than did she.

Once more Paganini was tempted to divide the love of his magic Guarnerius, when, a year later (1833), he became the owner of a grand viola by Stradivari. The viola, or tenor violin, is a little larger than a violin, and goes one-fifth lower. It has a deeper tone, of a more pensive quality, and requires long fingers and great power in the performer to bring out its best effects. Paganini fancied that here was a chance to astonish the world with new effects, as the viola is seldom used for solo-playing; and as he was still ill, he asked Hector Berlioz, the greatest composer after Beethoven, to write a solo for him. The idea, however, 'ran away' with the composer, and the solo expanded into that great symphony known as *Harold in Italy*, in which the solo of the viola streams out like an angel's song above every other instrument in the orchestra.

Paganini, however, was away from Paris for three years, in the vain search for health, and so he did not hear the wonderful symphony till 1838, when Berlioz, broken in health, in deepest poverty, and borne down with the load of his wife's debts, produced it at a concert which he had got up in the faint hope of retrieving his fortune. Paganini was thrilled, as Berlioz thus relates:

'The concert was just over; I was in a profuse perspiration, and trembling with exhaustion, when Paganini, followed by

his son Achilles, came up to me at the orchestra door, gesticulating violently. Owing to the throat affection, of which he ultimately died, he had already completely lost his voice, and unless everything was perfectly quiet no one could hear or even guess what he was saying. He made a sign to his son, who got up on a chair, put his ear close to his father's mouth, and listened attentively. Achilles then got down, and, turning to me, said, "My father desires me to assure you, sir, that he has never in his life been so powerfully impressed at a concert; that your music has quite upset him; and that if he did not restrain himself he should go down on his knees to thank you for it." I made a movement of incredulous embarrassment at these strange words; but Paganini, seizing my arm, and rattling out, "Yes, yes!" with the little voice he had left, dragged me up on to the stage, where there were still a good many performers, knelt down, and kissed my hand. I need not describe my stupefaction. I relate facts, that is all.

'Going out into the bitter cold in this state of white-heat, I met M. Armand Bertin on the boulevard. There I remained for some time, describing the scene that had just occurred, caught a chill, went home, and took to my bed more ill than before. Next day I was alone in my room, when little Achilles entered, and said, "My father is very sorry to hear that you are ill, and if he were not so unwell himself he would have come to see you. Here is a letter he desired me to give you."

'I would have broken the seal, but the child stopped me, and saying, "There is no answer; my father said you were to read it when you were alone," hastily left the room. I opened the letter, and read as follows:

"MY DEAR FRIEND—Beethoven is dead, and Berlioz alone can revive him. I have heard your divine composition, so worthy of your genius, and

beg you to accept, in token of my homage, twenty thousand francs, which will be handed to you by Baron de Rothschild on presentation of the enclosed.—Your most affectionate friend,

NICOLO PAGANINI."

'Then only did the truth dawn upon me, and I must have grown quite pale, for my wife, coming in at that moment, exclaimed, "What's the matter now? Some new misfortune? Courage! We have endured as much before."

"No, no; quite the contrary."

"What, then?"

"Paganini has sent me twenty thousand francs."

"Louis! Louis!" cried Henrietta, rushing distractedly in search of my son, who was playing in the next room, "come here! Come to your mother! Come and thank God for what He has done for your father!"

'And my wife and child ran back together, and fell on their knees beside my bed, the mother praying, and the child, in astonishment, joining his little hands beside her. Oh Paganini! what a sight! Would that he could have seen it!

Of the music which Paganini produced from this magic Guarnerius, the brilliant pianist Kennedy, of Dublin, who heard it in that city in 1831, said to me that 'no human being could conceive of its wondrous power without hearing it. It was Paganini first, and every other violin-player nowhere. He had fingers long and thin as pipe-shanks, and so could reach from the bottom of the finger-board to near its top without shifting his hand, and thus could play a rapid run of tenths more easily than an ordinary player can play a run of octaves, and his octaves were so true that they sounded like a single note.'

R. B. Stewart, who was one of the orchestra of the old Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, when Paganini appeared in that city, and who had heard every great violinist between 1814 and 1885, said that

not one of them approached Paganini, in whose hands the violin seemed not a mere instrument but a living personality, speaking things never spoken before and never heard since.

Paganini seemed to have a contempt for the low musical pitch of that day, which is now known as 'French pitch' or 'continental pitch;' for, while the orchestral accompaniments of his solos were written in E flat, he, with his violin tuned half-a-tone higher, played the solo in the much opener key of D major, so much more suitable for getting easy chords, harmonics, and pizzicatos. For the same reason his *Carnival de Venise* was arranged for the orchestra in the key of B flat, while Paganini, with his violin tuned half-a-tone higher, played the solo in the more brilliant and open key of A major. That curious trick puzzled many skilled musicians; but R. B. Stewart had an eye that could bore into you like a gimlet, as I can personally attest, and he detected the trick, though Paganini never allowed the band parts out of his sight, and carried them away after every rehearsal and performance.

The extraordinary magnetic power poured through that magic Guarnerius brought Paganini a constant stream of gold, and gold is supposed to command all that the world contains or a man desires; but, alas! it could not bring him health. Nature runs long accounts, but exacts heavy interest. The excesses of youth had left their mark on this great genius, and he was a physical wreck at the age when most men are at their best. Change after change he tried in vain, and at length landed at Nice, the air of which had always agreed with him. He

grew weaker every day, and seldom left his couch. One evening he seemed more kind and patient than usual, and, after a short slumber, whispered to his son, 'Draw back the curtains, *caro mio*; the moon shines on the sea.' It was done, and he raised himself and gazed long and earnestly upon the restless sea, so suggestive of his own life; and then the whispering of the wind among the trees or the distant murmur of the sea seemed to suggest to him some melody or harmony, and he feebly stretched forth his hand for his magic violin. A few sweet tones he was able to draw forth, and then, with a deep sigh, he gently laid the violin down. 'Ah! I could once'—was all he said. Then he lay back, and allowed his eyelids to droop. 'I will sleep now,' he whispered, with a smile upon his lips, and then he gently drifted out into the Great Beyond.

The magic violin, it was found, he had bequeathed to his native town, Genoa, with the fatal request that it was never to be played upon by any other, which, alas! was simply signing its death-warrant. A peculiarity of wood is that as long as it is handled and used it lives, and wears but little; but whenever it is laid aside it immediately begins to decay, and become the prey of insects. This magic violin, for which ten thousand pounds were offered and refused, and which might have thrilled the world for hundreds of years to come with its heart-searching tone, is becoming worm-eaten in its grand glass case in the Municipal Palace of Genoa, and will soon be a little heap of worthless dust. So passeth away the glory of the world.—*Chamber's Journal, London.*